The Bhalesi Dialect of Jammu and Kashmir:

Phonology, Grammar, and Linguistic Significance

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The Bhalesi dialect occupies a geographically limited yet linguistically pivotal zone in the Western Himalayan region of Jammu and Kashmir. Spoken in the Bhales tract to the north of Bhadarwah, Bhalesi represents a transitional Indo-Aryan variety situated at the intersection of Western Pahari dialects, Kashmiri, and the peripheral influence of Dardic languages. Its importance lies not in the size of its speech community, but in the archaism and structural integrity it preserves.

Unlike many Himalayan dialects that have undergone extensive leveling under the influence of dominant regional languages, Bhalesi has retained a range of phonological contrasts, grammatical categories, and morphological processes that have disappeared from most modern Indo-Aryan languages. These features make Bhalesi a crucial data source for historical and comparative Indo-Aryan linguistics.

The first and most authoritative linguistic description of Bhalesi was produced by Dr. Siddheshwar Varma, based on intensive fieldwork conducted in 1928 and published in 1948 under the title *The Bhalesi Dialect*. Prior to Varma's work, Bhalesi was mentioned only in passing in the *Linguistic Survey of India*, where it was treated as a peripheral variety of Bhadarwahi. Varma's monograph decisively established Bhalesi as a structurally independent linguistic system, deserving separate grammatical treatment.

According to Grahame Bailey, the speech of the Bhales tract (Bhalessa) is classified as a Western Pahari hill dialect within the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. Bailey does not recognise Bhalesi as an independent or separate language; rather, he conceptualises it as a local, unstandardized hill dialect forming part of the wider Western Pahari dialect continuum of the Western Himalayas. He emphasises that Western Pahari dialects do not possess sharp linguistic boundaries and that variation occurs gradually from tract to tract, making the Bhales dialect transitional in character and closely connected with neighbouring Chenab Valley varieties such as Bhadarwahi and Sarazi. The Bhales tract, situated in the upper Chenab region, is characterised by mountainous terrain and relative isolation, conditions which, according to Bailey, have contributed to the preservation of archaic Indo-Aryan linguistic features. The dialect is purely oral, village-based, and lacks a written tradition or standardized form, functioning primarily as a language of home and community life. Bailey further observes that speakers tend to identify linguistically with their region rather than with a named language and frequently shift to Dogri or Urdu in administrative and educational contexts. For Bailey, the linguistic significance of the Bhales dialect lies in its

conservative character and its value for understanding the historical continuity, settlement patterns, and gradual evolution of Western Himalayan Indo-Aryan speech.

This paper presents a full-length descriptive account of Bhalesi based on Varma's work, reorganized, expanded, and contextualized for a modern readership. Bhalesi is approached here not merely as a "dialect" in a sociolinguistic sense, but as a linguistic archive, preserving older Indo-Aryan structures under conditions of geographical isolation and relative socio-political marginality.

The Bhales region is characterized by steep mountainous terrain, dispersed hamlets, seasonal migration patterns, and historically limited access to urban centers. These factors have played a decisive role in maintaining linguistic conservatism. Social networks remain localized, inter-village communication is restricted by terrain, and external linguistic influence has historically been minimal.

The dialect spoken in this region is locally referred to as *bhalesi galla* or simply *bhali*. The term *galla* ("speech" or "talk") emphasizes linguistic practice rather than ethnic identity. From an external perspective, however, Bhalesi has often been subsumed under broader labels such as Western Pahari or Bhadarwahi, a classification that obscures its internal complexity.

Varma records several phonetic variants of the name—*bho'lesi*, *bhaleji*, *bhali*—reflecting internal phonological variation and the absence of standard orthography. Attempts to derive the name from Sanskrit *bhalla* ("good" or "auspicious") remain inconclusive due to the lack of expected phonological correspondences. Varma's refusal to impose speculative etymologies anticipates modern descriptive linguistics and reinforces the empirical strength of his work.

One of the most significant contributions of Varma's analysis is the clear identification of two internally coherent sub-dialects: Southern Bhalesi and Northern Bhalesi. This division is not superficial but penetrates all levels of linguistic structure.

Southern Bhalesi, spoken in and around villages such as Kalhotran, represents the more conservative variety. It preserves:

- Strong phonemic nasalization of vowels
- Clear morphological marking of neuter gender
- Older participial and adjectival endings
- Stable agreement patterns

Northern Bhalesi, centered around Jikyas, shows systematic innovation. Its defining features include:

- Progressive loss of nasal vowels
- Reduction or elimination of older participial markers
- Development of a semantic distinction between near and distant future
- Increased reliance on accent and word order

This north–south division illustrates how micro-geographical variation within a small region can produce typologically meaningful linguistic divergence.

Bhalesi possesses one of the most complex vowel systems among Western Pahari dialects. It distinguishes not only vowel length and quality but also employs internal vowel alternation as a grammatical device. The system includes short and long vowels, centralized and peripheral vowels, diphthongs, and glides.

The most striking feature is the role of vowel mutation (Umlaut) in marking grammatical number. Rather than adding plural suffixes, Bhalesi frequently modifies the vowel of the root:

Singular	Plural	Meaning
ghoro	ghore	horse(s)
ghori	ghorei	mare(s)
jutti	juttie	shoe(s)

This pattern aligns Bhalesi more closely with Kashmiri than with Hindi or Punjabi and suggests the survival of an older Indo-Aryan morphological strategy. Umlaut in Bhalesi is systematic rather than sporadic, indicating a grammatical rule rather than lexical irregularity.

Nasalization in Bhalesi functions both phonetically and morphologically. In Southern Bhalesi, nasal vowels frequently distinguish:

- Singular and plural forms
- Present and past tense forms
- Certain oblique case constructions

Northern Bhalesi shows a gradual loss of nasalization, particularly in unstressed syllables. This loss is compensated by changes in vowel length, pitch, and accentual prominence.

Accent in Bhalesi is phonemic and plays a compensatory role in preserving grammatical contrasts. Stress patterns often signal distinctions that were once expressed through suffixes or consonants, demonstrating a dynamic interaction between phonology and morphology.

While Bhalesi broadly conforms to the Indo-Aryan consonantal system, it preserves several rare features. Most notable among these are the lateral plosives (*tl, dl, dhl*), sounds produced by a plosive closure released laterally.

Bhalesi	Historical Source	Meaning
tlAkri	Sanskrit *trāka*	balance
tlAkro	*trāka*	strong
karoth	*kartar*	saw

These consonants are virtually absent in standard Indo-Aryan languages and survive only in select Himalayan dialects. Their presence in Bhalesi represents a conservative phonological development and serves as a diagnostic feature of the Bhadarwahi–Bhalesi linguistic zone.

Bhalesi preserves a three-gender system—masculine, feminine, and neuter—at a time when neuter gender has disappeared from most Indo-Aryan languages. The neuter remains productive in Southern Bhalesi, particularly in adjectival and participial agreement.

Case relations are expressed through a combination of:

- Oblique noun stems
- Postpositions
- Vowel alternation

Example: *ghoro* “horse”

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	ghoro	ghore
Dative	ghore	ghoron

Case	Singular	Plural
Genitive	ghoreu	ghorkei

This system reflects an older Indo-Aryan grammatical pattern where phonological change plays a central role in morphosyntax.

Adjectives and Agreement

Adjectives in Bhalesi agree with nouns in gender, number, and case. Agreement is most fully realized in Southern Bhalesi.

Gender	Singular	Plural
Masculine	rulla	rulle
Feminine	rulli	rulli
Neuter	rullu	rullu

Northern Bhalesi shows partial erosion of neuter agreement, providing evidence of ongoing grammatical simplification. This contrast allows scholars to observe grammatical change within a single speech community.

The Bhalesi verbal system encodes tense, aspect, person, number, and gender. The verb substantive (“to be”) preserves archaic plural forms:

Person	Bhalesi
1 sg	dha
2 sg	ahas
3 sg	ahe
1 pl	aham
2 pl	ahath
3 pl	ahan

Lexical verbs show similar conservatism:

Verb: pinu “to drink”

Person	Singular	Plural
1st	pitu	pitam
2nd	pitus	pite
3rd	pito	pite

An independent negative verb system—rather than suffix-based negation—distinguishes Bhalesi sharply from neighboring dialects.

Perfect participles in Bhalesi agree in gender and number:

Verb	Masc. Sg	Fem. Sg	Masc. Pl	Fem. Pl
gahanu (go)	geu	gei	gee	gia

Passive and causative constructions are formed using *-io,* a productive suffix indicating voice and agency change. These constructions are systematic rather than lexicalized, demonstrating grammatical robustness.

Bhalesi numerals preserve Indo-Aryan roots but exhibit significant phonological compression:

Source	Bhalesi	Meaning
dvipańcāśat	bi’unza	52
chaudah	udde	14

Such forms illustrate long-term sound change while retaining etymological transparency.

The Bhalesi lexicon reflects the ecological and cultural environment of the region. Vocabulary related to:

- Pastoralism
- Seasonal migration
- Cattle breeding
- Agriculture and tools

is particularly rich. Several lexical items traceable to Vedic or early Sanskrit sources survive only in Bhalesi and related dialects, making the language invaluable for historical lexicography.

The Bhalesi version of “The North Wind and the Sun” provides extended natural discourse. It illustrates:

- Clause chaining
- Aspectual sequencing
- Pragmatic particles
- Natural word order

This text confirms that Bhalesi grammar functions cohesively beyond isolated paradigms.

Bhalesi occupies a critical position in the Western Himalayan linguistic continuum. Its phonology reflects areal influence from Kashmiri, while its morphology preserves Indo-Aryan archaisms. The dialect thus serves as a bridge between major linguistic zones and contributes essential evidence for reconstructing earlier stages of Himalayan Indo-Aryan.

Bhalesi is not a marginal speech form but a structurally complete and historically significant linguistic system. Siddheshwar Varma’s documentation remains foundational, and its expansion into a full-length book chapter underscores Bhalesi’s enduring relevance for Indo-Aryan linguistics, dialectology, and language preservation.